DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 192 377 CS 205 900

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TITLE Constructing Items for Assessing English Writing Skills. Technical Note.
INSTITUTION Southwest Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, Los Alamitos, Calif.
REPORT NO SWRL-TN-2-80/22
PUB DATE 18 Aug 80
NOTE 14p.: For related documents see CS 205 894-898.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Student Evaluation; Teaching Methods; *Test Construction; *Testing Problems; *Test Items; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Specifying and writing appropriate items for student writing assessments is an exacting task. All too frequently, however, teachers approach this task by reading a skill statement and hurriedly writing a few items with correct answers combined with several distractors. This approach disregards the essentials of isolating a single skill for assessment, considering whether a productive rather than a receptive skill is being assessed, guaranteeing the precision of the directions, and serving diagnostic purposes with the use of appropriate distractors. Writing accurate, appropriate, precise specifications is time consuming, but such effort by writing teachers is essential when the results of the project may be used in minimum competency testing. (Nine items--each listing the skills statement, grade level, and the sample item--are offered as illustrations of the difficulties inherent in the construction of test items for writing assessments.) (RL)

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ED192377

SOUTHWEST REGIONAL LABORATORY
TECHNICAL NOTE

DATE: August 18, 1980

NO: TN 2-80/22

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CONSTRUCTING ITEMS FOR ASSESSING ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS

Ann Humes

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the problems encountered when specifying the assessment of writing. Difficulties with skill statements and skill descriptions are noted. Also discussed are problems that occur during the writing of assessment items and directions for such items. Several sample items are presented: Their problems are pointed out and solutions are suggested.

CS205900

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CONSTRUCTING ITEMS FOR ASSESSING ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS*

Ann Humes

For a recent project, the critical writing skills for grades 1-6 were identified and grade levels were assigned on the basis of the appearance of the skills in textbooks and on competency lists.** Then specifications were written for each skill. These specifications consist of (1) a skill statement cast in terms used both by language arts authorities and competency lists, (2) a skill description that notes factors involved in the use of each skill, including other inherent skills and prerequisite knowledge, and (3) appropriate sample items for the skill and an item description that provides guidelines for preparing additional precise and appropriate items.

Writing the skill specifications posed many problems in addition to the usual ones of avoiding sexism, ethnic stereotypes, and violence. This paper first discusses the types of problems that may be encountered in specifying assessments for writing and then presents items that illustrate various problems and their concomitant solutions.

PROBLEMS

Many problems were encountered during writing skill specifications. Discrepancy between the simplicity of a skill statement and the complexity of the corresponding skill was one such problem. The skill statement frequently named an apparently straightforward skill; however, the statement

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*Larry Gentry and Joseph Lawlor assisted in the collection of data for this paper.

**For the complete list of skills and a description of their collection, see Humes, A., Writing skills for grades 1-6, Technical Note No. 3-79-23, SWRL Educational Research and Development, Los Alamitos, California, 1979.

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was deceptive. Writing the skill description required close analysis of all factors inherent in the skill and relevant to its assessment, and this close analysis often revealed that the skill was far more complex than its skill statement suggested. Some skills were exposed as so complex that they should not be assessed. For example, many competency lists promulgate this handwriting skill: "Writes sentences from dictation." However, content and task analyses reveal that this skill is not simply a handwriting skill, because writing sentences from dictation requires the use of many other skills, including those of spelling, mechanics, and listening.

Another problem is that some skills can be assessed only in terms of another skill. One skill that exhibits this problem is that of distinguishing between proper and common nouns. This competency is assessed by items for capitalization skills (i.e., proper nouns are capitalized; common nouns are not). Another example of a skill that poses this problem is the identification of sentence types: Most sentence types are assessed through items for punctuation skills (e.g., a question sentence is indicated by a question mark). However, an item should assess only one skill whenever such a policy is feasible. For example, items assessing ability to construct coordinate subject-noun phrases must not include assessment of subject-verb agreement (i.e., the singular/plural verb affected by conjoining two nouns should not be assessed).

Composing directions also poses a problem because omitting a word or using a single inappropriate term may mislead students. Specific directions must be painstakingly written so that students unquestionably understand the task. Yet directions must be devoid of technical words when this restriction is possible.

In addition to the problems above, different difficulties are posed by constructed-response and selected-response items. Devising constructed-response items often appears to be a simple task, but this apparent simplicity is misleading. These items must be carefully developed to ensure that the desired response is elicited. If, for example, the skill to be assessed is the transformation of a declarative sentence into a question, the item must constrain students from simply rewriting the sentence in the same word order and adding a question mark. Constructed-response items must also be designed to prompt explicitly any component skill or subskill that should be assessed by the item for the superordinate skill. If, for example, students are expected to "use precise language"--a component skill--in composing a specific product--a superordinate skill--the item stimulus must tell students to use "exact words."

The scoring of constructed-response items is also difficult, so guidelines for rating students' responses must be included in the skill specifications. The inability to devise such rating criteria implies that either the skill description or the item itself has an undiagnosed problem.

Scoring selected-response items does not pose this problem; scoring such responses is easy. However, devising the items can be even more exacting than developing constructed-response items. Devising selected-response assessment items for writing is particularly difficult because items must require a response that assesses ability to write rather than ability to read. This important factor is frequently ignored.

Another important consideration in writing selected-response items is the amount of reading students must do before they can select a correct answer. The required reading should be as limited as possible;

however, this reading requirement sometimes cannot be lowered without invalidating the assessment item. Another reading problem pertains to the vocabulary used in the items. The words used must be limited to those appearing on controlled vocabulary lists for each grade level. Thus writing a good primary level item using only listed words is a challenging task.

Constructing distractors for selected-response items also entails development problems. Distractors should be designed to serve diagnostic purposes, and the diagnostic information that distractors elicit should be described in the skill specifications. Furthermore, distractors must be carefully screened so that they are appropriate for the grade level of the assessed skill; for example, the letter f is an appropriate distractor in items assessing the spelling ph at grade 5, but ph is not an appropriate distractor for assessing f at grade 1.

The problems discussed above apply generally to many item types. Specific items are noted below as examples of the kinds of problems that must be ameliorated during test making.

EXAMPLE ITEMS

All the items below display problems inherent in item construction. The problem(s) and the solution to the problem(s) are discussed after each item is presented. The correct answer is always circled.

1.

Skill Statement

Uses apostrophe in singular possessive forms. [Grade 4]

Sample Item

Directions: Which word is right?

Betsy has a pet bird. She wants to clean the _____ cage.

A. birds'

B. birds

(C.) bird's

The problem in the item above is distractor type A. Its inclusion requires the student to distinguish between singular and plural possessive forms at the fourth grade level. However, the use of the apostrophe in plural possessives is generally not appropriate for assessment until fifth grade. To ameliorate this problem, distractor A may be revised so that the apostrophe precedes its correct position in the word (e.g., bir'ds).

2.

Skill Statement

Recognizes correct word order: subject-verb-object. [Grade 2]

Sample Item

Directions: Which is a good sentence that tells about the picture?

[picture: girl running after a boy]

(A.) Mary is chasing John.

B. Mary John is chasing.

C. John is chasing Mary.

Distractor C is grammatical and plausible as an answer for the item above. Thus interpretation of the picture stimulus is assessed rather than recognizing word order. But items for writing assessment should not focus on students' ability to "read" pictures. Therefore, either an implausible distractor should be written for choice C, or the picture should be changed.

3.

Skill Statement

Uses exclamation point to end an exclamatory sentence. [Grade 4]

Sample Item

Directions: Which is the best mark to use in the blank?

"The barn is on fire _" Jan shouted.

A. ,

(B.) !

C. ?

D. .

A dialogue quotation is used as the stimulus in the item above so that the speaker tag will suggest the exclamatory nature of the sentence. However, the item actually assesses punctuation of dialogue quotations rather than terminal punctuation because the tag follows the quotation. This problem is remedied by either rewriting the stimulus so the tag precedes the quotation or by deleting the comma as an answer choice.

4.

Skill Statement

Spells vowel-r pattern: /er/-are, /er/-ear. [Grade 4]

Sample Item

Directions: Which letter or letters finish the word?

[picture: bear]

b_____

A. air

(B) ear

C. are

D. er

Distractor C is inappropriate in the item above. This distractor, when added to the letter in the stimulus, forms the word bare, a homophone for the correct spelling. Although spelling homophones is an important skill, homophones should be assessed separately and should not be used as distractors in items for other spelling skills. Distractor C can be revised to ere.

5. Skill Statement

Distinguishes noun forms: singular/plural. [Grade 3]

Sample Items

Directions: Which word means more than one?

A. glass

B. sleep

C. house

(D) sheep

Additional context is required to determine the answer for the item above. The correct response, choice D, has the same form as either a singular or a plural noun. Therefore only nouns with different plural and singular forms should be used in this item type.

6. Skill Statement

Identifies words that rhyme. [Grade 2]

Sample Item

Directions: Which word rhymes with the name of the picture?

[picture: nine]

A. fire

B. five

(C) fine

The item above does not measure ability to discriminate rhyming words. Rather, it assesses the ability to discriminate final consonants because the first consonant and the vowel sound are the same for all three answer choices. To match rhyming words, however, students must

recognize that both the medial sound and the final sound are the same. Thus one distractor should have the same vowel sound as the target word, but a different final consonant; the other distractor should have a different vowel sound, but the same final consonant. To correct the problem for this item, distractor B may be revised to fun.

7.

Skill Statement

Limits a paragraph to one main idea. [Grade 4]

Sample Item

Directions: Which sentence tells the main idea of the paragraph?

Football players must be strong to play in a game. They must be able to knock other players down. Players must be able to run fast. Fast runners can carry the ball to make points in the game.

(A) It takes strength to play football.

B. Running is an important part of football.

C. Football is a fun game that everyone should play.

D. Scoring points is important.

This item assesses a reading rather than a writing skill--reading for the main idea. The skill for writing is not identifying the main idea, but limiting the content to that pertaining to the main idea. The item may be revised to one that asks students to select the sentence that can be added to the paragraph because it fits the main idea.

8. Skill Statement

Uses dialogue for only one speaker in a paragraph. [Grade 5]

Sample Item

Directions: Which conversation is written correctly?

(A.) The bus returned to school in the afternoon. Linda and Ricardo got off the bus and walked toward the classroom. "Did you enjoy the trip to the zoo? Ricardo asked.

"I sure did," Linda replied. "My favorite part was the monkey house because some of the monkeys act just like people."

Ricardo laughed and said, "Yes, you're right."

B. The bus returned to school in the afternoon. Linda and Ricardo got off the bus and walked toward the classroom. "Did you enjoy the zoo?" Ricardo asked. "I sure did," Linda replied. "My favorite part was the monkey house," she said, "because some of those monkeys act just like people." Ricardo laughed and said, "Yes, you're right."

C. The bus returned to school in the afternoon. Linda and Ricardo got off the bus and walked toward the classroom. "Did you enjoy the trip to the zoo?" Ricardo asked.

"I sure did, " Linda replied. "My favorite part was the monkey house," she said, "because some of those monkeys act just like people." Ricardo laughed and said, "Yes, you're right."

Completing this item type entails too much reading. The item can be revised so that the student needs to read the conversation only once, selecting the point at which a new paragraph should begin. The item below is a more appropriate assessment not only because it requires less reading, but also because it requires a constructed response (actual paragraphing) rather than simple identification.

Directions: Read this story part. Where should a new paragraph begin?

The bus returned to school in the afternoon. (A) Linda and Ricardo got off the bus and walked toward the classroom. (B) "Did you enjoy the trip to the zoo?" Ricardo asked. (C) Linda replied, "I sure did. (D) My favorite part was the monkey house because some of those monkeys act just like people."

9.

Skill Statement

Uses appropriate formal/informal language. [Grade 6]

Sample Item

Directions: The underlined word is too informal. Which word should you use?

A new gang of students will be coming to our school.

A. bunch

(B.) group

C. crowd

This last item type exemplifies two problems that are characteristic of many inappropriate assessments: (1) The directions are not specific enough, and (2) the stimulus is inappropriate.

The formal and informal nature of language is relative to the specific audience for the discourse. Thus the directions for such items should specify the audience. A writing situation that appropriately requires formal language from sixth grade students would be one requiring them to write a letter to someone they had never met.

The problem in the stimulus is the use of gang; that it is "too informal" is unclear. If the writer is referring to a group of juvenile delinquents, then gang may be a more formal and accurate description of ths students than any of the other answer choices. Thus the target word in the stimulus should be changed.

CONCLUSION

Specifying and writing appropriate items is an exacting task. However, the all-too-frequent approach consists of reading the skill statement and then whipping off a few items with a correct answer and several distractors without regard to isolating a single skill for assessment, to considering whether a productive rather than a receptive skill is being assessed, to guaranteeing the precision of the directions, or to serving diagnostic purposes with the use of appropriate distractors. Writing accurate, appropriate, precise specifications is time consuming. Yet this kind of effort is essential when the results of a project may be used to measure student's ability to meet competency standards.